

The free exchange of ideas and information *

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Those who are against the 'free flow of information' rarely make their objections openly. The government of the USSR is, even so, an example of one fiercely opposed to the possibility. For [Yuri Galanskov \(1939-1972\)](#), the hunger for free information cost him his life: sentenced to seven years hard labour for disseminating a report of a public trial, Galanskov did not survive.

Resistance against freedom of information is fought as a rule by governments like that of the USSR in the following way: the government in question does not proclaim to be against the free dissemination of information, rather it is against the dissemination of disinformation, lies, slander and libel, and fabrications. Since western diplomats, even after many decades, have not suspected this stratagem, it can result in considerable success. I regard a part of the '[recommendations](#)' put forward by the culture ministers of a number of West and East European countries at Helsinki in June 1972 as one such success and a small defeat in the battle for free information, which set me to write the following remarks:

1 What strikes me as unpleasant in all these recommendations is the intrusive nature of them. Sport is a wonderful thing. Philosophy, too. But what would people say if a government suddenly decided 'to ensure' the 'participation' of young and old in sport and or in philosophical studies, or took measures to prevent citizens from pursuing the wrong sport or philosophy?

2 It seems to me that ministers in their recommendations have worked on the assumption that knowledge of the culture of other peoples positively influences relations with these peoples. This seems to me an unproven assumption. One could equally assert that the less people know about one another, the less chance there is of hatred and conflict. I do not think it improbable that the anti-American feeling present in many of the West European intelligentsia is in part caused by the intensive cultural contact with America.

France and Germany, who have been studying one another's cultures assiduously for the past hundred and fifty years, have fought three bloody wars against one another in that time. If the West European reader and television viewer were exposed to as much Soviet culture as his East European neighbour, maybe the hatred of the Soviet Union would take on such gigantic proportions as it has in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, etcetera. In the Netherlands, Protestants and Catholics have lived side by side for centuries without even so much as a scuffle having taken place between the two groups. Could the almost complete cultural isolation of the two groups from each other not have had a salutary influence? At any rate, it seems to me unreasonable that one should blindly assume the opposite as documents show the European ministers have done. There may be a minimum of knowledge required to sustain hostile feelings of one people against another but there is no maximum above which those feelings are reduced or disappear.

3 I shudder a little at the recommendations to 'protect' the culture user, in particular the young culture user, against evil influences; for example, the recommendation 'to instil in young people, through education and culture, a refusal to accept retrograde ideas'. What are 'retrograde ideas'? Are they old ideas? Or 'Thou shalt not steal'? Guaranteed, an ancient idea. Or the idea that every man should have the freedom to call the government of his own country a band of conmen? Or are retrograde ideas those that regard an earlier state in nature or culture as better than the current one and therefore regard the reinstatement of the old state as something desirable? Is the idea of ridding the Wadden Sea of gas extraction or of returning to the Russian citizen the civilian freedom he enjoyed in 1913 a 'retrograde idea'?

Or are retrograde ideas simply 'reprehensible' ideas? Monseigneur Gijsen believes in the devil incarnate. [Karl Marx](#) believed that a person's bad characteristics could be explained by his Jewish and negroid ancestors. How do governments now – let us assume for a moment that all Europe agrees that both ideas are retrograde – intend to effect the 'non acceptance' of these views? By disseminating the works of Dr Gijsen and Dr Marx widely among the young in order that the young, having made acquaintance with these retrograde ideas, may 'refuse' to accept them? I fear that such is not the intention of the signatories of the recommendation. Their recommendation sounds much more like a recommendation not to encourage the young to read these works but in fact to hinder them in their attempts to read these works. It seems impossible to me to interpret these recommendations as anything other than an exhortation to censorship. Reading the text of the recommendation thus: 'to take appropriate measures to protect their national culture from forms of production (this is probably a rather awkward translation of the Russian proizvedenija vhr) which disseminate ideas of hatred and enmity between nations, war, violence and racialism, having particular regards to their corrupting influence upon youth'. What 'means' are 'appropriate' here? How can a national culture be protected against something if it is not by censorship?

4 I also shudder to see how the recommendations tend to make express demands on artists. In the text of the 'recommendations' it is recommended that artists 'should make a decisive contribution' to any number of good causes.

5 It is in conjunction with this type of demand that the attempt 'to provide artists with material conditions which enable them to do creative work in freedom from constraint' strikes me as unpleasant – such material advantages may sooner limit the artist's freedom than promote it when they are offered in conjunction with demands as those aforementioned.

6 Cultural exchange is something which I believe should be applauded, as long as such exchange takes place in a situation of maximum freedom and with as little governmental intervention as is possible. A 'library of European masterpieces' sounds rather horrible to me. Who would curate this library? A conference of [Engels](#) assisted and advised by civil servants and professors? I think it would be better if it were the public of each country who decided what they want to read, hear or see of another country. I would be prepared to allow a modicum of propaganda if necessary: the donation of books to foreign libraries, the subsidy of translations, etcetera - but the presentation of French culture to the German public by the French government would, I think, be dangerous. The German stepping into a bookshop should in my opinion be free to choose the French book that he wants, with a minimum of hindrance as a result of the French government's notions of what a German should read.

7 Had I been at Helsinki, I would have recommended the following recommendations:

- a that anyone who wishes to proclaim retrograde, racist, or warmongering ideas should not be hindered from doing so by any law or government measure.
- b that the question of whether a statement, book, ballet, picture, etcetera is or is not retrograde, racist or warmongering should never be asked or answered by a government office but may only be the subject of debate among the civilian population.
- c that no-one may be forced or encouraged by the government or on behalf of the government in any way which he or she deems to be restrictive to take part in any cultural activity except primary school as mandated by the state.
- d that the government of country A should not be able to prevent the dissemination in country B of cultural products belonging to country A which the government of country A deems to be inopportune.

One should not forget in all of this that our freedom of speech and the freedom to write what we want are exceptional in the world and in world history and that most people are not in favour of freedom of the press. We owe the fact that we have this freedom in a

number of European countries not to the electorate but to the liberal gentlemen who pressed for freedom of the press at the time. How often do we hear of intellectuals in the Netherlands who reply wholeheartedly 'yes' in answer to the question 'should De Telegraaf newspaper be banned?'. Public judgments in favour of freedom of the press of the Gijsen-Marx sort do not in my view amount to much.

Representatives of dictatorships are in the habit of doing two things when in international company: first, they make general declarations in favour of freedom of expression. Second, they propose a range of 'reasonable' restrictions to this freedom; for example, the need for protection of their culture against racist views. In this, they are behaving precisely in accordance with the situation in their own country where freedom of expression is mostly anchored in the constitution and where all limitations to this freedom are justified by an appeal which warns of the dangers that threaten a society if 'retrograde ideas' are allowed free reign. It does not matter to East European diplomats which idea generally judged to be bad is held up to western Minister Engels' as a tasteful label to stick onto their [national culture protection measures](#) - as long as they succeed in pushing him to the point that he undertakes something in that direction.

There are two contrasting views to be discerned here - you could call them eastern and western, revolutionary and liberal, communist and capitalist. The first view - which is the one that has clearly triumphed in Helsinki - is that the individual, public opinion, the electorate, the reader, the national citizen, if left to his own devices, will yield to the forces of evil (Zionism, capitalism, fascism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, racism, revisionism, etcetera). It is therefore best to 'protect' him against these evil forces.

The second view is that one should give people the freedom to acquaint themselves with all views and tendencies, including those racist or otherwise, and to choose for themselves. The implicit belief that underlies this view, or at any rate plays an important role in it, is that people, when faced with a choice between reasonable and unreasonable, will choose reason.

Whoever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter? is the rhetorical question that is then asked. I am not so optimistic as Milton but I do believe that freedom of expression makes some things impossible. Governments simply *cannot* peddle the same nonsense when people are free to oppose it. It is my belief that certain *actions* on the part of government are very difficult to carry out when all are free to express their horror at these actions.

For this reason, I believe it is vital that all attempts by dictatorial sides at international conferences to limit freedom of expression should be resisted as fiercely as is possible by all present. This can be done in two ways: by resisting *all* forms of censorship and by voting against *any* recommendation to 'protect', or, as I have done in the aforementioned recommendations, by explicitly guaranteeing freedom to those who wish to express views that are generally discredited such as racist, hatred between peoples, etcetera.

I do not accept for a moment that Minister Engels and the gentlemen who accompanied him to Helsinki think it desirable that our country should end up in the position of countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia and the like where freedom of expression is concerned. But, if Engels does not want that to happen, then he should not sign documents which contravene our constitution and which are inspired by people who feel their power to be so extremely threatened by any kind of freedom that they have not only obliterated this freedom in their own country but would also like to see it disappear or at any rate restricted in neighbouring countries.

[*] Preliminary recommendation for the Atlantic Conference to be held at The Hague on 13 April.

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